Skulls in ancient cemetery on Vanuatu suggest Polynesians as first settlers

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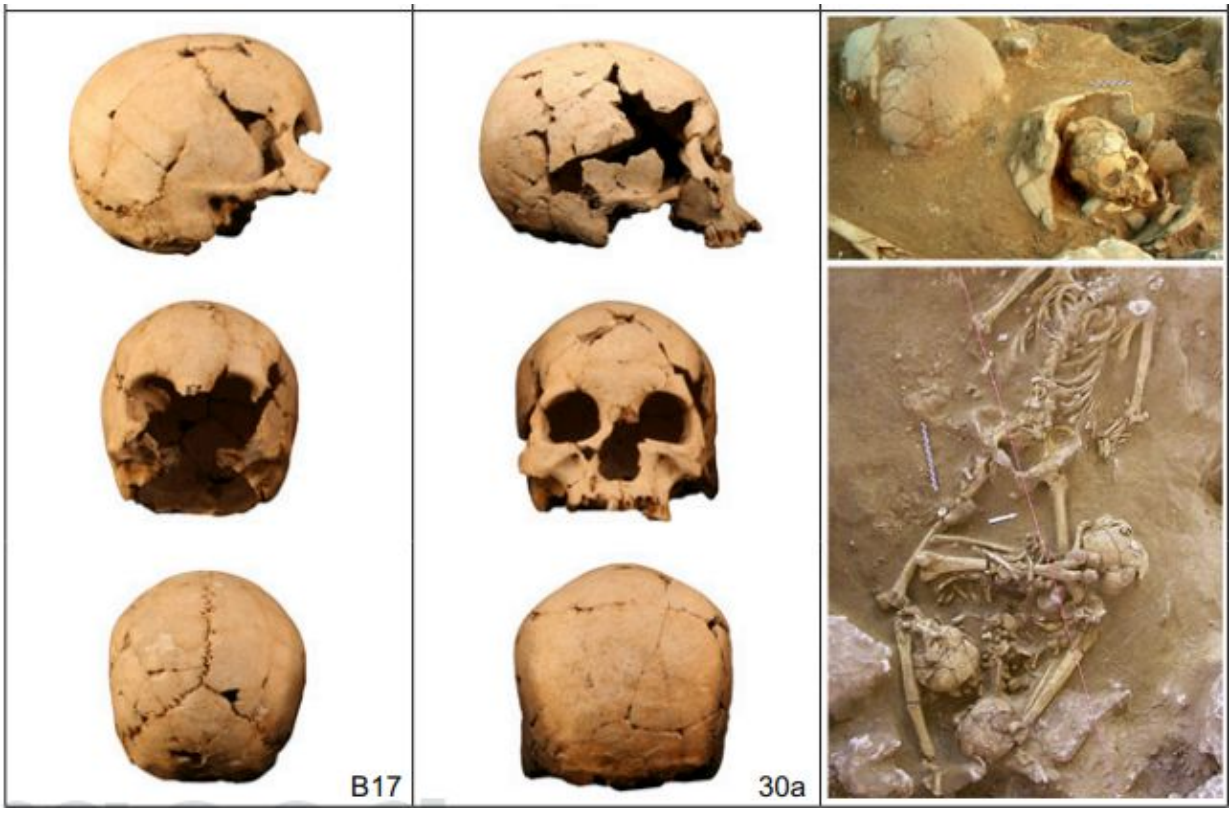

Teouma Lapita skulls. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2015). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1516186113

(Phys.org)—A small team of researchers from France and Australia has found evidence in a very old cemetery (first discovered back in 2004) on one of the islands of Vanuatu that suggests that early Asians and

Polynesians were the first human settlers, not Melanesians as many have suggested. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the team describes how the question of the origin of the people of the Pacific Islands has confounded visitors from the west since perhaps the 16th century and why they believe their study finally provides the answers.

The researchers focused on skulls dug from the bottom of a cemetery on Efate Island, which has been dated back to approximately 3,000 years ago, making it the oldest in the South Pacific. The skulls, the team reports, belong to a people known as the Lapita, who are believed to have been the earliest settlers of the islands. The team compared the skulls with those of people currently living on the island and also other parts of Polynesia and Melanesia and concluded that the ancient skulls were closest in structure to modern Asians and Polynesians. This news came as a bit of a surprise because the current natives most resemble Melanesians. The researchers believe that the evidence suggests that Melanesia people arrived sometime after the Lapita had already populated the islands in the area and interbred with the people already living there.

The researchers note that other evidence of the ancient Lapita people still exists as well—those living on the island share many cultural and linguistic similarities with early Polynesians, for example. But, they also add, it still doesn't adequately address the issue of how it was that people living 3,000 years ago managed to navigate and populate an island group so far from their home—a path that would have taken them from South-East Asia through Melanesia and then into Polynesia, while somehow not leaving any evidence that they had mixed with the Melanesians. Their findings do suggest though, that the islands of Vanuatu may have served as a springboard of sorts, offering the early settlers a place to jump to other parts of the vast Pacific Ocean.

More information: Frédérique Valentin et al. Early Lapita skeletons from Vanuatu show Polynesian craniofacial shape: Implications for Remote Oceanic settlement and Lapita origins, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2015). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1516186113

Abstract

With a cultural and linguistic origin in Island Southeast Asia the Lapita expansion is thought to have led ultimately to the Polynesian settlement of the east Polynesian region after a time of mixing/integration in north Melanesia and a nearly 2,000-y pause in West Polynesia. One of the major achievements of recent Lapita research in Vanuatu has been the discovery of the oldest cemetery found so far in the Pacific at Teouma on the south coast of Efate Island, opening up new prospects for the biological definition of the early settlers of the archipelago and of Remote Oceania in general. Using craniometric evidence from the skeletons in conjunction with archaeological data, we discuss here four debated issues: the Lapita–Asian connection, the degree of admixture, the Lapita–Polynesian connection, and the question of secondary population movement into Remote Oceania.